



The Merlon, North Face: Three New Routes

United States, Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

The glacier was calving every half hour all day and all night. A thundering boom would reverberate off the narrow cirque walls, then a wave of water would roll across Glacier Lake. During the day we could get used to it, but at night the detonations would blast us right out of our dreams.

This was my fifth climbing trip into the Cloud Peak Wilderness, but my first to the cirque below Cloud Peak's tremendous east face. It was mid-August and I'd come in with two fellow Wyoming climbers: towering, pencil-thin Julian Poush and Chris "Slim" Murray. Poush's father had actually attempted a route in this cirque over 40 years ago. We had help from horse packers getting our gear to the west end of Cloud Peak Reservoir, then humped heavy packs up past Diamond Lake, from which we scrambled northwest, gaining 700 feet to reach Glacier Lake (11,490'). Our goal was to climb the north face of the Merlon, a separate tower (ca. 13,200') just south of Cloud Peak's east face. We accomplished this the first day: Jenga (8 pitches, 5.8 R). We rapped off the eastern prow of the Merlon, replacing old slings that Ken Duncan and I had put in eight years earlier when we climbed No Climb For Old Men on the south face. [Editor's note: The Merlon was first climbed, by its eastern buttress, in 1961. The south face was first climbed in the 1970s, though the exact line is unknown; the south face has three known routes, all 5.11. See "Recon" in AAJ 2015. The routes described in this report are the first known to have been climbed on the north side, above Glacier Lake.]

The second day we ascended the left-hand side of the face up a left-facing dihedral. We got caught in a snowstorm at the second belay, waited it out, and continued climbing wet rock an hour later. The rock and climbing were superb, although sometimes scary—snow-covered face climbing, stemming through overhanging, guillotine-like slabs, and a final exit via a very reachy (if you're not 6-foot-4-inches tall) finger crack yielded Guillotine (7 pitches, 5.10+).

On the third day, Poush and I climbed a third route up the Merlon's north face, taking a center line up the middle through overlapping overhangs to a right-facing dihedral. The first pitch was runout, the dihedral pitches spooky because of car-size blocks: American Direct (8 pitches, 5.10+ R).

It snowed the next day and we did a half carry back down to Sapphire Lake, finishing the hike out over the next two days. Seven gorgeous days in the Cloud Peak Wilderness. As per tradition, no pins, no bolts, no fixed gear, no aid.

– Mark Jenkins

Images



The east face of the flat-topped Merlon. The north face is on the right. Cloud Peak is behind and to the right.



At sunrise above Glacier Lake, Poush looks up at the north face of the Merlon.



Poush leading easy ground on Guillotine.



Making good use of the snowstorm that the team waited out atop pitch two of Guillotine.



Julian Poush leading through very big loose blocks on Jenga, the first known route up the north face of the Merlon.



Julian Pouch leading the run-out first pitch of American Direct.



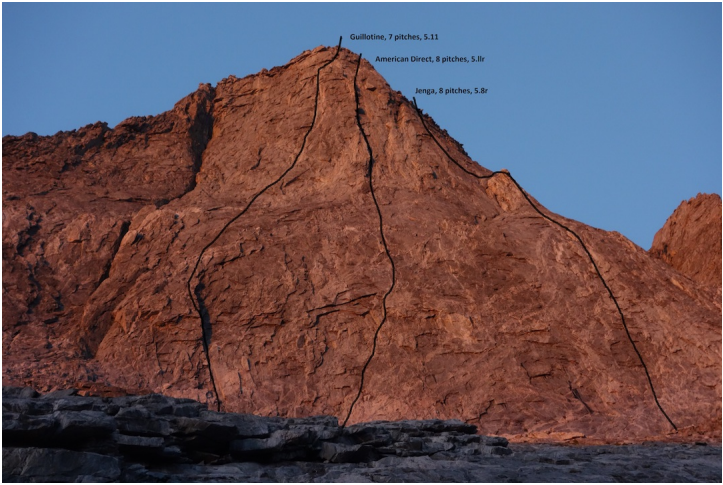
Julian Pouch cruising Jenga with Glacier Lake and the Cloud Peak glacier below.



Chris "Slim" Murray (right) and Julian Pouch looking back at the Merlon (left) and the top of the east face of Cloud Peak.



Summer can be a relative term in the high mountains of Wyoming.



The north face of the Merlon, showing the three new routes Mark Jenkins, Julian Poush, and Chris Murray climbed over a week in August.

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